

# CALIFORNIA HISTORY NUGGET



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## SANTA CATALINA—"ISLE OF SUMMER"

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A few miles west of an unexplored mainland two sails crept close to a large island. The two small ships were under the command of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo. A few days before this October morning in 1542 he had been the first white man to set foot on the mainland—California. Now, many hundreds of miles from his home port to the south in New Spain, Cabrillo was pushing on in his search for new lands, greater wealth, and the illusive Strait of Anián.

The vessels came to anchor in a small harbor and put off a boat. As it approached the shore, Indians sprang from behind rocks and bushes, yelling and dancing. At friendly signs from the Spaniards, the tall, light-skinned, almost naked Indians lay down their bows and arrows.

Although the Indians received the Spaniards kindly, and the island proved a delightful haven, Cabrillo weighed anchor at noon that same day. He named the island "La Vitoria," after one of his ships. Three months later Cabrillo died and was buried on San Miguel Island not many miles north.

In the years that followed, Spanish galleons heavily loaded with the riches of conquest, plied the waters along the coast of California and New Spain. Like lean hunting dogs on the trail of some heavy, clumsy prey, English ships sailed these waters eager for Spanish booty. It may be that some of these fierce seadogs of England put in to the shelter at La Vitoria to make repairs and obtain food.

In these years Spain was growing fat through her trade with the East. Manila was the magnet which drew her ships. In 1595, Sebastian Rodríguez Cermenho sailed from Manila, his galleon heavy with silks and other treasure. Acapulco in New Spain was his destination. Cermenho also bore instructions from the viceroy of New Spain to make careful examination of the coast of California. His ship, the haughty *San Agustín*, was driven ashore in a storm and wrecked. Cermenho and his men built a crude boat and put out to sea again for Acapulco. Half starved, they touched at La Vitoria. Without beads and trinkets, they were like men without money. The Indians gave them very little food.

Something had to be done about the impolite Englishmen who were interfering with the Spanish king's trade. King Philip issued orders to his viceroy in New Spain, Caspar de Zuñiga Conde de Monterey,

who in turn gave orders to his trusted "Pilot of the waters of New Spain," Sebastian Viscaíno. Viscaíno was to sail up the coast of California and find a port of refuge for ships in the Manila trade. Viscaíno sighted La Vitoria Island on the day of the feast of Saint Catherine (Santa Catalina), November 24, 1602.

Perhaps Viscaíno knew nothing of Cabrillo's discovery of this island. Perhaps he did not like Cabrillo's choice of a name. At any rate, Viscaíno called the island "Santa Catalina."

The Indians of Santa Catalina Island continued to be friendly to white men. From their great canoes they shouted a welcome to the Spaniards on board ship. The Indian women busied themselves preparing a feast of roasted sardines and a small fruit like the sweet potato.

The Indians told Viscaíno that their home was not far away. A short sail brought the visitors to another harbor. Here there was more feasting. The Spaniards felt much at home. They were well fed, and they enjoyed the dogs that yapped at their heels very much like good Spanish dogs.

Exploring the island, the Spaniards found it to be rough country covered chiefly with cactus and small shrubs. Only in deep canyons were there to be found trees—poplar, willow, and oak. Descending one of the hills, they came upon a prairie. A large circle of long stones pointing upward formed a temple to the sun. In the center stood an idol. To the Spaniards this idol was not a beautiful object. On the breast of the figure was painted the sun and on the back, the moon. It had two horns but no head. All about the idol, which the Indians called Chinigchinich, the Sun God, were feathers of eagles, placed there as offerings. Father Torquemada, spiritual advisor of the fleet, wrote that the Indians of all the Channel Islands met once a year at this temple. Then each brave fastened an eagle tail feather to the idol as an offering of peace.

At this strange place there were also two big crows that talked in the Indian tongue. The Indians said that they were sacred birds.

"I believe," wrote Father Torquemada, "that the Devil was in those two crows and spoke through them. . . ." Some soldiers shot the crows to stop the devil from talking. When Viscaíno saw the idol, he walked toward it.

"You must not go near it," the Indians warned him.

Viscaíno ignored the warning. Approaching closer, he examined the hideous image well. Then he had a cross made, and the name of Jesus placed on the top of the idol.

When Viscaíno was unharmed, the Indians thought him a great man. This led Torquemada to hope that now the Indians would turn

from Chinigchinich to the Christian faith. But years after Torquemada was dead, long after the Indians on the mainland had become Catholics, those on Santa Catalina still worshiped the Sun God.

The high intelligence of the Indians on Santa Catalina astonished the Spaniards. Although they were members of a tribe numerous in the south of California, they were more advanced in many respects.

These Indians lived in huts grouped in villages, or *rancherías* as the Spaniards called them, and excelled as craftsmen. The women fashioned trays and vases from rushes. The men carved wooden trays inlaid with coral and bone. Their work was beautiful and well designed.

Few California Indians knew how to make canoes. Those on Santa Catalina Island were really great canoe builders. Deftly put together from hand hewn planks held by thongs, the canoes were used in fishing and for traveling to the mainland.

On Catalina were vast quarries of steatite, or soapstone. From this soft stone the Indians made mortars, bowls, and other utensils used by Indians throughout southern section of California.

Never numerous, this superior group of Indians was practically extinct by 1811. It is believed that many may have been killed by Russian otter hunters. One theory is that their numbers were greatly reduced by an epidemic of measles. Some Indians, nevertheless, did cross over to the mainland and remain there.

Early Californians raised great herds of cattle. They exchanged hides and tallow with Yankee skippers for luxuries difficult to get otherwise. Spain was jealous of her colony and forbade trade with the sharp Yankees.

Some laws are easier to make than to enforce. Trading went on with the Yankees under the name of smuggling. A Yankee skipper, Captain William Shaler, put in at Santa Catalina in 1805 to repair his vessel, the *Lelia Byrd*. Shaler quickly noted the advantages of the island harbor: it was safe from the eyes of the authorities, was not too near nor too far from the mainland. He took advantage of the fine opportunity to do some smuggling. Other smugglers soon made their headquarters at the island.

It required the United States government to stop smuggling from Santa Catalina. During the Civil War in 1864 a station was established on the island to combat privateers. Plans also were drawn to build a fort and army barracks on the island. Troops occupied the island for a while, but a scarcity of water caused this project to be abandoned. The government in 1867, by executive order of President Johnson, reserved the right for all time to twenty acres of land at

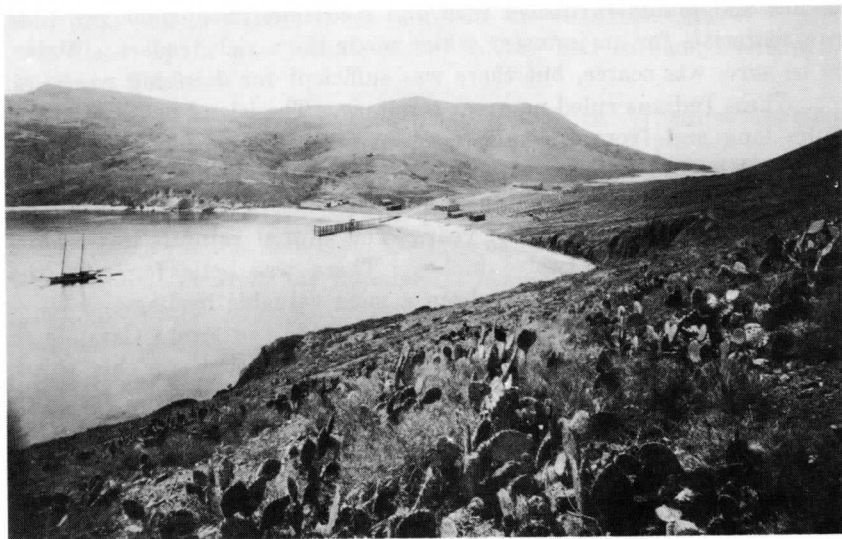
proved easier to raise on the island than cattle, which are wide rangers. Then there was always the question of the scarcity of water. In 1863 a government survey showed 15,000 sheep and more than 7,000 goats on the island, but only a few cattle.

The goats were for the most part wild goats, descendants of those left years earlier by some unknown visitor or settler. They were wily, shaggy, big-horned creatures. When Santa Catalina began to attract sportsmen, the goats were considered excellent game.

Santa Catalina did not escape the persistent, ever searching prospector. In 1868 Daniel Way started a rush of gold seekers to the island. Way, however, was not the first to find gold there. As far back as 1830 an otter hunter named George Yount found traces of "color" in the rocks while exploring the island. He was probably excited and filled with great dreams, but had no success. In 1854 he was back again, still hoping.

Talk of gold on Santa Catalina did two things—it brought gold seekers and increased the supposed value of the land many, many times. An English mining syndicate was formed in 1889. The company had such wild dreams of treasure that it paid \$40,000 as a first payment for the island of a total price of \$400,000. But soon afterward the island was back in the hands of George Shatto, the man who sold it to the syndicate. Gold mining had proved a poor venture. Two years later Shatto sold the island to J. B. Banning.

Banning seemed more farsighted than the previous owners of the island. He carried out Shatto's vision of transforming Santa Cata-



THE ISTHMUS—SANTA CATALINA ISLAND, ABOUT 1898

lina into a resort and was successful. He formed a stock company to build a hotel, houses, piers, and boats, for these were needed to attract sportsmen and vacationists.

Santa Catalina was now coming into its own as an ideal place for those who love hunting, fishing, and boating. The idea of mining gold was dropped, although other forms of mining continued. Clay was still taken out for pottery. Rock was quarried for buildings and for the breakwater at San Pedro. Steatite quarries furnished an excellent substitute for marble on many Los Angeles buildings.

The vast kelp beds offshore yielded their harvest of material for iodine and the medicinal agar. Beautiful abalone shells sold at a premium to tourists. But Santa Catalina's real commercial value lay in the field of outdoor sports. Sport fishing became the thriving industry of the island.

Timm's Landing, a fine harbor where a straggling tent city mushroomed every summer, became Avalon. Other small settlements such as those of Fourth of July Harbor, Cherry Valley, Wilson's Harbor, and the Isthmus, disappeared, while a real city of homes, churches, and schools came into being at Avalon. While the town was growing, need of water became an increasing problem. For a time water was shipped in great tanks from the mainland and stored in a water tower at Avalon.

In 1913 Avalon was incorporated as a city, for many of the people owned land and homes there. This incorporation meant that Avalon could have a city government and raise money by taxes for much-needed improvements. Twelve miles from the city a dam was built to store drinking water.

Although residents of Avalon considered life there ideal, many people in the early days complained about the slow method of getting messages to and from the mainland. Carrier pigeons came to the rescue for a while, but hawks had a way of interrupting this speedy service. Finally, a telegraph cable was laid between island and shore in 1902. This solved the communication problem for the time.

Would wonders never cease? On May 10, 1912, a serious young man with big ideas flew a queer machine through the air from the mainland to Catalina. He was Glenn L. Martin. This was a great feat in those days. Today a swift plane service whisks travelers to the island in a few minutes.

Not all those interested in Santa Catalina were mere pleasure seekers. Naturalists went there and were thrilled, for the island's location, climate, and isolation combined to produce strange trees, plants, and animals. There, scientists found the ironwood tree with its heavy





hardwood and a species of mountain mahogany found nowhere else. Five different species of plants were found to be native of the island only. Certain island birds, especially the quail, had characteristics which made them different from the same species of birds living elsewhere.

Nature and sports lovers owe a great debt to a Pasadena naturalist, Charles Holder. Mr. Holder was one of the first to recognize the true advantages of Santa Catalina. He was so delighted by the charm and natural attractions of the island that he spent much of his life studying its fish, plants, animals, and hidden trails. He told others of his discoveries, and wrote books. He called Santa Catalina the "Isle of Summer."

While Charles Holder rowed about the island, he was fascinated by the sight of great fish leaping into the air in pursuit of flying fish. He called them "leaping tuna." His friend Colonel C. P. Morehouse of Pasadena tried fishing for the tuna with a rod in 1896. This was a new sport. Morehouse lost many a line and rod before he learned how to land a tuna.

Here was a blood-tingling sport that took skill and patience. So quickly did it catch on that in 1898 a Tuna Club was formed at Santa Catalina. People came from distant countries to try their hands at tuna fishing and to enjoy the climate. The whine of the reel became a familiar sound on the channel.

"Old Ben," leader of the sea-lion herd, came to like visitors, even feeding from their hands. Commercial fishermen complained that the pampered sea lions stole fish from their nets. The game fishermen complained that the commercial fishermen were destroying the spawning grounds of the tuna and yellowtail. This was true. In 1913 Mr. Holder, through his own efforts and those of such members of the Tuna Club of Santa Catalina as Gifford Pinchot, finally obtained passage of a law closing the waters around the island to commercial fishermen. The song of the reel was assured for years to come. "Old Ben" and his herd could steal all the fish they wished.

In 1919 William Wrigley secured control of the company owning and managing Santa Catalina. Buildings of Spanish Californian style were erected. Under the Wrigleys, Avalon grew into a world-famed center for sports and recreation.

When Cabrillo dropped anchor at the island off the unknown mainland, perhaps he considered it an unimportant stopping place in his ambitious voyage of discovery for powerful Spain. In the centuries that followed, the mainland was to become a wealthy state in a great, new nation; Santa Catalina an isle where thousands each year could find health and pleasure.